DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 049 SO 016 672

AUTHOR Wojtan, Linda S.
TITLE A Cultural Context for Japanese Education.
INSTITUTION Indiana Univ., Bloomington. East Asian Studies Center.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 6p.; Printed on colored paper.
AVAILABLE FROM East Asian Studies Center-Outreach Services, Memorial Hall West #203-205, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405 (Free while quantity lasts).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT News and Notes on the Social Sciences; Spr 1984-85

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; *Comparative Education; *Cultural Influences; Curriculum; Educational Objectives; *Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Foreign Culture; Intellectual History; *Public Education; *Social Attitudes; Social Influences; Success
IDENTIFIERS *Japan

ABSTRACT

Certain Japanese educational practices serving as worthwhile examples to the United States' educational system are highlighted in this overview of Japanese education. However, it is stressed that because the United States and the Japanese educational systems are dependent upon their social context and exist in a symbiotic relationship within that context, the United States should refrain from refashioning its educational systems on Japanese patterns of success. The article begins by tracing the history of the Japanese system up until the period following World War II when the Japanese system underwent drastic changes in efforts to become more democratic. A brief section summarizing contemporary Japanese education is followed by an examination of some its objectives and values. Three positive ways in which Japanese society shows support for its educational system are described: (1) Japanese society fosters a love of learning (a 99 percent literacy rate), promotes the notion of success through long-term goals attained by hard work, and rejoices in the celebration of music, literature, and the arts; (2) educational funding reflects the high priority placed on education; and (3) family life in Japan provides strong support for education. Focusing on positive and negative aspects of Japanese education, the final section comments on the high level of prestige and upward mobility awarded Japanese teachers, Japan's rigorous formal and informal curriculum, and Japan's heavy reliance upon an examination system. (LH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Linda Wojtan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED266049

A CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR JAPANESE EDUCATION

by
Linda Wojtan
East Asian Studies Center
Indiana University

News and Notes on the Social Sciences
Spring 1984-85

SO 016 672

EAST ASIAN OUTREACH
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

EAST ASIAN STUDIES CENTER
Memorial West 203
Bloomington, Indiana 47405
812-335-3765

Outreach Coordinator: Linda S. Wojtan

SPRING 1984-85

A CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR JAPANESE EDUCATION

by Linda S. Wojtan

In today's press, article after article refers to the national, business and educational challenge provided by the Japanese. The extent of this challenge is eased or exacerbated by an entire genre of books that analyze the Japanese success phenomenon and suggest that we can meet the challenge by adopting or adapting Japanese policies and strategies. All of these books pay at least some measure of homage to the Japanese educational system. For Americans reading these books, a quick fix seems clear—the Japanese educational system is the key to Japanese success. Therefore, the U.S. can regain its leadership by simply refashioning its educational system on the Japanese pattern.

The U.S. educational system, however, despite reports from a recent proliferation of blue ribbon commissions, is a viable system. It is unable to absorb transplanted doses of the Japanese educational system. Both the U.S. and Japanese systems of education are dependent upon their societal context and exist in a symbiotic relationship with that context. This article will describe and briefly examine this relationship in Japan and make some comparisons with the U.S. system.

THE JAPANESE SYSTEM: A BRIEF HISTORY

The modern period of Japanese education began with the era of the Meiji Restoration in the latter 19th century. Prior to this time, education was conducted through private tutoring, although by the middle of the 19th century most of the feudal domains had official schools for their samurai youth. Also, there were well over a thousand private academies enrolling commoners as well as samurai; and there were tens of thousands of village institutions called *terakoya* or "temple schools" because of their unusual location in the local Buddhist temple where the children of commoners, including some girls, studied.

It was, however, the Meiji government—only in its fourth year of existence in 1871—that created an Education Ministry and soon established an ambitious plan for a highly centralized and uniform school system. This was an entirely fresh start in education. None of the feudal domain schools and terakoya and few of the private academies survived into this period.

Initially the Meiji curriculum incorporated many American educational practices, and this was a period of liberalism. Soon, however, there was a shift in political philosophy from a liberal, individual oriented view to one that was state oriented. Soon, Minister of Education Arinori Mori, who had previously been instrumental in making American educational practices available, stated: "In the administration of all schools...what is to be done is not for the sake of the pupils, but for the sake of the country." In 1888 an ordinance issued by the Education Ministry created a course in morals and made it a required subject. This was another indication that changes were taking place. The philosophy of the German Johann Friedrich Herbert (1776-1841), which pointed to moral instruction as the paramount purpose of education, was gaining favor. Increasingly, Japanese educational leaders visited Germany to learn of her educational practices. German philosophers were invited to Japanese universities and soon replaced Americans. The Imperial Rescript on Education, promulgated in October, 1890, finally formalized the shift to a statist position:

> Our Imperial Ancestors have founded our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue. Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein lies the source of Our education.

Except for certain changes in the educational structure, the system established during this period prevailed until the end of World War II. Strident militarism and nationalism were among the outgrowths of this curriculum.

THE MODERN JAPANESE SYSTEM

After World War II the Japanese educational system underwent drastic change in efforts to become a democratic educational system with equal opportunity for all, coeducation of both sexes, and separation of public education from religion.

The Japanese National Constitution, under Article 23, guarantees academic freedom and further provides under Article 26 that:

> All people shall have the right to receive an equal education corresponding to their ability, as provided by law. All people shall be obligated to have all boys and girls under their protection receive ordinary education as provided for by law. Such compulsory education shall be free.

Based upon the spirit and principle of the National Constitution, the Fundamental Law of Education (Law #25), consisting of a preamble and 11 articles, was passed in 1947. Article 1, in stark contrast to the 1980 Imperial Rescript, states the aim of the modern Japanese educational system:

> Education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of people sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labor and have a deep sense of responsibility; and who are imbued with an independent spirit, as builders of a peaceful state and society.

The contemporary Japanese system consists of 9 compulsory years—6 years of elementary school and 3 years of lower secondary. Admittance to the optional 3 years of upper secondary schooling is through a competitive examination. The attendance rate for compulsory education has never dipped below 99% since the end of World War II. The attendance rate for upper secondary education has dramatically increased in the post-World War II years until in 1981 it stood at 97%.

SOME OBJECTIVES AND VALUES OF THE JAPANESE SYSTEM

In many ways the Japanese organization seems very similar to the U.S. educational system. A look at some of the underlying values and objectives of the Japanese system, however, reveals aspects that are quite different from that in the U.S.

The Japanese educational system is a highly standardized one in curricula, textbooks and examinations. The goal is to provide students with similar academic experiences so that they will later be comfortable and productive while working together in what has been described as a "tight society." Japan is a homogeneous, monocultural society. Therefore, the standardized Japanese system makes sense and is particularly well suited to the population it serves. In essence, the system determines one's function and status in society. Operationally, one advances through the system on a prescribed path. This continues even through the upper levels. For example, at the university level there is no need or opportunity to shop around and experiment with courses in a field of specialization. The faculty for each branch of the university, e.g. law, economics, humanities, science, medicine, engineering and agriculture, has already prescribed a course of study.

This "prescribed path" phenomenon characterizes much of the Japanese system. In contrast, the U.S. system appears to be rather free-wheeling with decentralization being an important hallmark. Rather than fostering a consensus, our system promotes diversity of opinion and debate. Further, rather than determining one's function and status in society, our educational system is but one springboard for achievement. Individual initiative, pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, the self-made person and the late bloomer are all still part of the American Dream and serve to work against any type of prescribed path educational system.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the U.S.—in stark contrast to Japan—is neither a homogeneous nor a monocultural society. The prevailing multicultural mix is apparent in the statistics. In 1980, the one million aliens who registered in New York and New Jersey represented 164 countries and dependencies. As a result, the questions of what language to use and what values characterize the American system create controversy while at the same time enriching our civic life. Consider, for a moment, this phenomenon in light of the U.S. educational system. The problems posed by language alone work against adoption of a standardized, national system. Indeed, it is estimated that by 1990 there will be 3.4 million U.S. school children from non-English speaking backgrounds. The diverse programming and flexibility needed to cope with such a situation boggles the mind.

Beyond language, however, are other noteworthy differences. Japanese schools serve as representatives and custodians of a cultural tradition to which students owe allegiance and subordination. Obedience is inculcated at an early age, given freely and symbolized by expressions of gratitude. Japanese children often thank their teacher at the end of a lesson. In a sense, through their compliance with the education system students accept the larger authority of the moral and intellectual tradition of the society. Many feel that this compliance is deeply rooted in Japanese culture and buttressed by work habits and family structure.

U.S. schools, on the other hand, place much more emphasis on individual advancement and self-realization and far less on conveying a common body of knowledge and common cultural tradition. Increasingly, U.S. schools are seen as a "resource" whose task it is to serve "clients."

As mentioned earlier, these two very different educational systems flourish in a symbiotic relationship with two very different societies. There are three aspects of Japanese society that are worth noting because of their relationship to the educational system:

(1) Japanese society in general fosters love of learning and has been labeled by some as a "learning society." With a literacy rate of around 99%, Japan has been called the greatest data gatherer on earth. The society unabashedly respects learning, promotes the notion of success through long-term goals attained through hard work rather than happenstance, and rejoices in the celebration of what we might call "high culture"—music, literature, and the arts. A prime example of this is the Japanese national holiday, Culture Day (November 3)—a celebration of high government honors paid to artists in a variety of professions. It is doubtful that such a concept would ever take hold in the U.S. let alone merit federal holiday status.

(2) Funding for Japanese education in 1980 reached 7.2% of the GNP (8.6% if private schools are added). Although funding is not the most important factor, it nevertheless reflects the priority placed on education.

(3) The phenomenon of the "education mama" is an important aspect of the education system. According to this role model, mothers enroll their children in special classes, drill them in their studies and prod them when needed. I would expand this concept to that of the "education family." It is not uncommon for parents to allot between 20 to 40% of their income for their children's schooling, including the cost of *juku* (after school schools) and special cram

schools just prior to major exams. Further, during the exam period family life revolves around the student. Often a tutor is hired, the student is relieved of household chores, socializing in the home is curtailed and a shroud of silence envelopes the house. Clearly, success within the educational system is a family matter.

Numerous comparisons of these three points to the U.S. situation could be made. The three characteristics noted above are part of some school systems and family life and absent in other cases. The most important question we should ask ourselves is to what extent are these reflected on a mass level and incorporated into national educational policies?

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

A number of aspects of the Japanese school system warrant closer examination. First, a look at some positive aspects and then some negative ones.

Japanese Teachers—An Enviable Position. One of the most positive aspects of the Japanese system is the role of the *sensei*, the teacher—literally, one who has lived before or first born. Japanese teachers are secure in their work since teaching is a highly respected profession and is seen by most as a lifetime occupation. Further, as state employees, teachers in Japan expect and frequently experience considerable upward mobility. In the schools, teachers work together as a unit rather than as members of exclusive departments. Often teachers spend a good deal of time each year determining the objectives and goals of the schools or the year. This group spirit is also seen in the way Japanese teachers relate to each other as professionals. The ramifications of this relationship are seen in both internal and peer pressure. Although Japanese teachers receive tenure upon initial employment and are virtually assured of lifetime employment, they rarely slacken their efforts. At least one study has concluded that supervision of teachers by colleagues at the local level is more important than national guidelines in maintaining standards. Beginning teachers are not embarrassed to seek guidance from more experienced colleagues. Such consultations cover many different aspects of classroom situations ranging from student motivation to evaluation. These frequent, informal after school meetings provide both ongoing supervision and a mutual support system that greatly enhances the quality of teaching.

Differences in salaries and teacher qualifications among diverse locations in Japan are quite small, although it is true that subsidies and salary incentives are sometimes used to attract teachers to remote communities. Certification of teachers is by state, or prefecture, with the general qualifications being monitored by the Ministry of Education. The Japan Teachers Union continues to play an active role as an advocate of teacher interests. In addition, the union functions as an advocate for long-term student interests.

While it is true that Japanese teachers function in a decidedly different milieu, there are perhaps some aspects of their system that can take root in U.S. soil in a type of hybrid fashion. Strategies should be devised and campaigns launched at the national, state and local levels to garner public and especially parental support for teachers and education in general. Too often education in this country is seen as a fiscal issue revolving around taxes rather than as an issue of national import. When Americans do turn their attention to education, it is in a grandstand manner utilizing top level commissions that issue dramatic statements such as "the rising tide of mediocrity." Education should be much more than a passing concern—perhaps we can learn from the Japanese in this area.

Curriculum. A second noteworthy component of the Japanese system is the curriculum. Japanese schools are demanding. Japanese students go to school 5½ days per week for a total of 240 days compared to 180 in the U.S. As a result, Japanese students receive 25% more schooling than U.S. students, and study after study confirms that they have much more homework or at least devote many more hours to after school studying.

What is perhaps most intriguing about the Japanese curriculum is the concept of developing "the whole person." Music, art and physical education are considered as important for small children as the basic subjects of social studies, science, math and language arts. This stands in sharp contrast to the U.S., where any course other than the basics is considered a "frill" and is the first to be cut during times of budget cutbacks. A high priority is placed on learning a second language, usually English. Although many students are reluctant to speak English, many Japanese students can read and write it.

Beyond the formal curriculum, however, is the equally important informal one. The school system fosters what might be called "a sense of ownership" on the part of students toward their school. This sense of responsibility is manifest in the fact that Japanese teachers and students all share the "dirty" cleaning work in the schools. As a result, students take physical labor for granted, not as something to be done only by those at the bottom of the social scale. At lunch time Japanese students take turns serving the meal to each other—group responsibility as well as improved table manners are the by-products here. Finally, Japanese students receive an important lesson in the meaning of delayed gratification and the value of saving when every elementary pupil in every elementary school saves a few yen each week over several years in order to finance the ubiquitous 6th grade class trip.

The question of flexibility in the curriculum is a sticky one. Although Japanese teachers do have some flexibility, their U.S. colleagues are encouraged to be more creative. Ezra Vogel points out that this U.S. penchant for curriculum innovation is a double-edged sword. He suggests that U.S. teachers' colleges do not train students adequately enough in the subject content to enable them to create their own materials. Further, the typical U.S. teaching and paper grading schedule leaves little room or energy for curriculum development. An end product of this situation is that U.S. innovation and experimentation causes confusion over what should be taught. This situation is by and large avoided in Japan where teachers are much more secure in knowing what they are expected to cover.

Any comment regarding Japanese education would not be complete without some mention of the educational television system which each week transmits around 96 programs to the schools. These programs are designed to sup-

plement regular classes and are selected not on the basis of popularity but on the basis of meeting educational needs and conveying informative content. In addition to the programs themselves, special textbooks are often also made available. The educational television system maintains a continuous program of research and consultation. There are approximately 125 academic specialists working in the national public television schools division. The result of these efforts is a high quality, national service readily and easily available to local schools free of charge. This system has no parallel in the U.S.

Thus the Japanese curriculum—both formal and informal, buttressed by a massive television effort—is an admirable one. While we should be wary of the rigidity of a specified curriculum, the concept of a curriculum designed for the whole person is one worth pondering. To what extent do we in this country provide a curriculum that addresses the development of the entire being, including moral and aesthetic development? To what extent do we structure school experiences that will foster inherent societal goals and virtues? Here again, there are elements of the Japanese experience that we can tailor to specific U.S. needs.

Some Negative Aspects. In the U.S. we speak of examination halls—in Japan they speak of "examination hell." This yearly period of national trauma culminates in either acceptance or the thinly veiled rejection message—"the cherry blossoms are falling." Examinations are the key to success in Japan; they are the narrow gate through which only some can pass. Examinations serve to preserve a common cultural core of knowledge.

January, the month when school applications are made, heralds the beginning of "examination season." Soon large portions of the population are drawn into a swirling vortex of activity. Television news programs carry coverage of the application sites; talk shows feature experts giving advice to parents. Television commercials promote guidebooks designed to help students pass examinations. Newspapers and magazines report on high schools and rate them according to their ability to advance students to college. The upcoming examinations seem to be the topic of everyone's conversation. The stakes are clear: if one is successful, a successful adult life awaits you. If, however, you are not successful, the number of options in your life narrows dramatically. The pressures of this system are enormous. They include bribery of officials, delinquency, student suicides, and a severe strain on family finances as parents try to pay for tutors and extra schooling. This latter point is especially important when trying to assess equality of opportunity for students from less wealthy families.

Emphasis on entrance examinations can result in a curriculum geared to the test, emphasizing only the fundamentals, rote learning, and "teaching to the test" rather than cultivating conceptualization and curiosity. Teachers pressured to cover the material to be tested often "leave behind" those who are not able to keep up. A recent study from the Prime Minister's office charges that only 26% of the students fully understand what they are taught. In addition, the examinations come at a time when students are attempting to cope with profound physical and emotional changes.

It is said that once Japanese students reach their end point—university admittance—they begin to coast. Classes are often skipped since class notebooks can always be borrowed from those who did attend class and the test can be passed through cramming. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the employment practices of many large corporations. These companies prefer to hire young graduates with limited practical or specialized experience, rather than older students with advanced degrees or working experience. These companies spend large sums to provide new employees with special training or further schooling tailored to the company's needs. The end result is that admittance to a specific university, rather than learning, becomes the goal of the educational system. Further, the company preference for hiring the graduate with a B.A. can be a disincentive to the student pondering pursuit of a higher degree.

The rigidity imposed by the examination system pervades the educational system. Many Japanese are today seriously questioning the continued utility of their system. Among the experts urging reform is former minister of education Michio Nagai, who reports that college is often referred to as the "golden years for idleness" because many students know that their futures are bright. Sadako Ogata, a professor at Sophia University, charges that the examinations are not an educational tool but a flunking system designed to thin out the ranks of prospective university students. On a larger scale, societal concern regarding the education system in general is reflected in the popularity of the book *Totto-chan*. This book focuses on a young girl expelled from school for her "uncharacteristic behavior." She is later enrolled in a unique progressive school where she experiences much success. The enormous popularity of this book suggests a questioning of the status quo.

Clearly, then, there are some negative aspects of the Japanese system, many of which can be traced to the examination system. The pitfalls of the examination system are many. We would be wise to avoid them and perhaps not consider any adaptation of the Japanese system in this regard.

One challenge that both the U.S. and Japanese systems face in the future is an appropriate response to what has been termed our high tech future. Specifically, many Japanese leaders have become particularly sensitive to the challenge of the Fifth Generation Computer. The Fifth Generation Computer is the ultimate machine—one that solves knotty problems in human ways. It is pseudohuman, artificial intelligence—a reasoning machine. The first four generations of computers have been little more than efficient calculators and processors of information—"number crunchers." The Japanese have promised to deliver this computer to the world in ten years. The ultimate challenge facing the Japanese educational system is the development of students who will be ready to meet the challenge of this new machine. Critics have charged that the present system of education does not foster creativity and, indeed, stifles it. Yet creativity and experimental thinking are just the type of traits needed by young people as they attempt to cope with this new computer in ten years. Can the Japanese educational system successfully respond to the demands of this challenge? This is perhaps the major educational challenge to the Japanese and U.S. educational systems over the next ten years.